

WOMEN AND NUTRITION

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Abstract: There are many aspects to food and eating behaviour when viewed from a wide psychological and sociocultural perspective. These include issues of morality, gender, class, self esteem and education. Through all of these aspects women are intimately concerned with food. This paper examines ways in which men and women eat differently and explores some of the issues involved in the broader social and cultural meanings of food and eating. It is argued that any attempt to provide eating guidelines, whether at an individual or social level, should take into account issues beyond physiological nutrition.

Key Indexing Terms: Women, nutrition, health, diet.

INTRODUCTION

"Food and drink have such intense significance that they are often linked with events that have nothing to do with Nutrition" (1).

Giving advice to people to "go on a diet" or to "build yourself up" and perhaps giving out an informational leaflet on healthy eating is a common practice and one fraught with difficulties. Health workers, including chiropractors and osteopaths, should be mindful of the fact that food has very many layers of meaning and significance, especially for women.

Proverbs concerning food and eating abound in our society. From "You are what you eat" to the well known adaptation "A Mars a Day.....!". Eating is an important physiological event with significant health implications. We all need to consume a certain number of nutritional elements in our diet, thus the often quoted 'balanced diet'. However, food and eating also have great social and cultural significance and factors such as gender and class have a crucial effect on who we are and what we eat. These factors, beyond the physiological, have the potential to tip the balance of the diet.

There are many aspects to food and eating behaviour when viewed in a wide psychological and sociocultural perspective. These include issues of morality, gender, class, self esteem and education. To be 'eating well' implies a sense of well being and health behaviour, compared to being 'off ones food', which suggests self

neglect and general imbalance (2). "Eat up it's good for you", implies not only nutritional virtues or tastiness but a "moral assurance that this is the right and proper way to behave" (3).

In our society food is used as reward and punishment, it has religious and moral significance, symbolic meaning in family life, and cultural importance. Through all of these aspects women are intimately concerned with food, so any discussion of women's nutrition needs to take account of these broader issues.

This paper will examine ways in which men and women eat differently and explore some of the issues involved in the broader social cultural meanings of food and eating.

FOOD FACTS AND FALLACIES

The recommendations by the Commonwealth Department of Health (4) and the resulting 'Healthy Diet Pyramid' are well known amongst health workers and are compatible with other recommendations eg. those for lowering the risk of cancer by dietary changes by Baghurst (5), which encourage increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and wholegrains, and decreased consumption of fat, alcohol and cured foods. There appears to be general agreement about which foods are 'good' for health and which are 'bad'.

These recommendations have been around for a number of years so the question becomes who is taking notice and making dietary changes that were in line with the recommendations although few people were aware of the existence of the recommendations (6). In that sample women appeared to show a greater interest in the importance of healthy diet and in dietary change than did men. Another study supported this finding by showing that women had diets "more in line with current recommendations" (5). What sex we are is an important factor in what we eat.

The studies of the types and amounts of food consumed by men and women raise fascinating issues about the sexuality of food. In one study the following comparisons were highlighted. Men ate more meat, eggs, full cream milk, ice cream, sugar in hot drinks, and bread than women. Women ate more fresh fruit and vegetables, slim/low fat milk, yoghurt, cream, and were more likely to choose brown/wholemeal bread than men (7). This reinforces the image of women's diets being more in line with nutritional recommendations (apart from the cream!). These differences by sex are also present in teenagers. In a

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study of teenage dietary practices it was found that, "on average girls eat more frequently than boys, but because of sheer volume, teenage boys' diets come much closer than the diets of girls to meeting the recommended level of intake." (8).

It seems in the teenage population, although girls choose healthier foods they do not eat enough in quantity. The question of how much food each sex requires is one to which, in my review I could find only vague answers, but it appears men need more food than women. One nutritional text states, "the amount of energy required varies between individuals depending on age, sex, occupation, the physiological state of the body and the amount of physical activity performed," and goes on to state that, "Due to their greater muscle mass, males have a higher basal metabolism than females thus the energy requirements of males are generally greater than the energy requirements of females." (9).

The perceptions of the amount of food required affects the consumption of food. Also, the value placed on appetite for each sex is different. Large appetites being expected and encouraged in men while women are admired for feeling full on very little and "eating like a bird". The perceptions of the type of food required also vary by sex. Men are regarded as needing a 'cooked meal' ie. meat and vegetables, while they are not regarded as so necessary for women and children (10). This attitude is most simply expressed in the advertising slogan 'Feed the man meat'.

SEX ROLES AND EATING BEHAVIOUR

Many authors identify the crucial role of women in the purchasing and preparation of food. It was emphasised in the 1967 publication called 'Food, Fact and Figures', "The housewife who goes out with her shopping basket is one of the most important persons in the community, for if she spends her money wisely she is helping to secure health and happiness for each member of her family" (11). This statement was illustrated by a cartoon of a woman, shopping bag in arm, with an angelic halo around her head! Although such extreme expressions are laughable in the 90's the underlying attitude is still prevalent.

The purchase and preparation of food is generally regarded as women's work and women's lives are intimately entwined with food. Attitudes vary greatly however depending on who the food is prepared for. As Susie Orbach states "Food is what she gives to others but must deprive herself of." (12). Being a good cook is part of the job description of a 'good'

wife and a 'good' mother. Food is symbolic of nurturance, when given to others, especially family members, but this often results in an imbalance. "Women, the mothers and caregivers, who nourish and nurture, receive little nourishment for themselves and from themselves" (13).

This imbalance in the giving and receiving of food and nurturance is related to the selfless aspect of femininity and to the fear of becoming fat, "...the dilemma faced by women; to provide carefully prepared food items for other family members but not eat these herself for fear of becoming larger than is deemed acceptable" (14). The only exception to this is the pregnant woman who is permitted to be 'big' with child, to 'eat for two' and begin to nurture her offspring in utero by eating the 'right' foods and abstaining from alcohol and smoking.

Interestingly despite the fact that most purchasing of food is done by women one article noted that, "the food preferences of other family members were paramount in shaping the patterns of family eating", and that, "the food preference of fathers exerted the strongest influence" (14). It could be said that although the woman is doing the shopping the choices are not completely under her control, the husband and family exert the remote control.

The political gender issues of power imbalance, the dictates of the feminine role and the narrow cultural definition of acceptable size for women are all issues that impinge on women's eating behaviours and therefore their health. Dieting, body image and self esteem are important concerns in nutrition and health.

SELF ESTEEM, BODY IMAGE & DIETING

With sex roles being so closely concerned with food it is no wonder that for many women food is a means of self definition. Dinner parties, baking competitions, the fierce secrecy surrounding prized recipes, and the importance placed on compliments related to food preparation are examples of its significance. Indeed many advertising campaigns use these themes, eg. "You ought to be congratulated".

"In fact in a woman's psychology, an important aspect of her self esteem derives from her ability to be a good nurturer" (12). The judgement of a good nurturer is of course in the eyes of the nurtured. Feedback in the form of comments and compliments, preferably on a regular basis, is required. Thus, an acceptable way for women to nurture their own self esteem is by feeding others, a psychological contortion!

The potential for disaster in this area is highlighted by women with eating disorders, and most people with eating disorders (90% of anorexics and bulimics) are women (13). Food is used to try to solve problems but it also creates problems. "For many women food provides a means of coping with stress and anxiety in their lives. Unfortunately, while food may temporarily soothe or assist with a difficult situation, self recrimination often follows when the woman attempts to reconcile her coping strategy with the ideal body shape suggested by society" (14).

The attempt to satisfy all hungers, including emotional cravings with food is in conflict with the narrow definitions of acceptable body size, in this way, food is both the comforter and the enemy. Women learn not to trust their hungers, and to continually strive to control them. When food plays such a central role in self esteem, identity, and emotional issues it is a 'recipe for disaster.'

One article parallels eating disorders and sexual disorders by referring to both as desire disorders, because, "when it comes right down to it women are not supposed to like food or sex very much" (13). The author goes on to state that, "the goal of therapy for the woman with a desire disorder is that she learn to live and trust her body, her self and her desires (13). Only when food and eating are disentangled from emotions, social dictates and role expectations will women be able to have their cake and eat it too!

The culture we live in dictates what food is fit for human consumption, what animals may be killed for meat and in what manner, and the type of food consumed distinguishes between social groupings. "What is eaten establishes one's social, religious and ethnic memberships" (1). Ask any child of a migrant family about their school lunch!

Culture also dictates the times it is acceptable to eat and what types of food are suitable for each meal. "Traditionally in all known societies including our own, we have eliminated any natural desire to eat, substituted for it cultural patterns, and enforced these cultural patterns with very heavy sanctions...." (16).

A crucial cultural distinction in eating behaviour is that of class. Socioeconomic status, as defined by occupation and educational level, has been found to be an important determinant in nutritional attitudes and behaviours. The general finding is that the richer and more highly educated in society have their healthier diets, more nutritional knowledge, and are more likely to make dietary changes (5)(6)(7). These differences are then passed on to the children of each

socioeconomic level. A study of teenage dietary practices showed that as meal regularity increased, so did the nutritional content of the diet, and meal regularity increased with rising socioeconomic status (8).

Generally however, sex seems to be of greater importance in determining dietary behaviour than socioeconomic status. "In spite of occupational trends in both sexes, women from the lowest socioeconomic group still had a markedly higher intake of all fruit and vegetable categories and lower relative intakes of take away meat dishes and processed meats than men from any of the occupational groups" (5).

CONCLUSION

"While the digestion of food in the gastrointestinal tract after its ingestion is mainly a biological process, the activities associated with the acquisition, preparation and choices of food are strongly determined by psychological and socio-cultural factors" (17).

"What is eaten, how it is cooked and served, the range of choice, who does the preparation, all are also a matter of material and social relationships. They are integrally located in a hierarchical social structure where power, wealth and freedom of choice are unevenly distributed" (3).

From one person's decision to become a vegetarian on ethical grounds to another person's 'addiction' to food as a compulsive eater, the meanings and significance of food and eating are complex and multifactorial. The above quotes both recognise the psychological and social significance of food and eating. The second quote highlights the effect of the uneven distribution of power in our society. This is pertinent in terms of class but even more significant along lines of sex. To be a woman in our society today is to have a complex relationship with food on many levels. So while women often eat healthier foods, the amount eaten, the feelings surrounding the acts of preparation and ingestion, individual beliefs and cultural parameters are all interrelated. Food and eating has many layers of meaning for women.

In studying some of the complexities of nutrition I have come to believe that for women to achieve a balanced diet there are other factors, such as power and wealth, that also require balancing. We are what we eat, but who we are, our personal power, social position, individual experience and cultural messages, largely determine what we eat. Therefore, I believe that any guidelines for healthy eating must also take

into account issues beyond physiological nutrition. Such issues are important when considering human nutrition both at the social level in education campaigns, and at the individual level in daily practice.

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